WILLIAM FLANAGAN: HIS LIFE AND MUSIC

An Essay

Presented to the Faculty of the

Moores School of Music

Kathrine G. McGovern College of the Arts

University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Musical Arts

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by

Mark Diamond

August 2018

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Abstract

The middle of the 20th century offers a rich and distinguished installment in American song literature. Hidden in the margins of this songbook is William Flanagan (1923-1969), a composer, music critic, and prominent social figure during the fifties and sixties. This essay sheds light on the underappreciated and underperformed composer while showing why William Flanagan belongs in today's standard repertory.

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Introduction

The middle of the 20th century offers a rich and distinguished installment in American song literature. Hidden in the margins of this songbook is William Flanagan (1923-1969), a composer, music critic, and prominent social figure during the fifties and sixties. His output as a composer was modest, consisting of one opera, several orchestral and chamber works, and only twenty-nine songs. Considering his limited oeuvre and relative disappearance from 21st-century recital stages, it may come as a surprise to read Ned Rorem in 1961, where he states, "At this moment, (Flanagan) has more performances per square foot than the majority of his contemporaries."[1] However, what makes Flanagan an indispensable part of music history is not just his composition, but also his hard-hitting music critiques and influential friendships, all of which promoted the healthy progress of American music.

[1] Ned Rorem, "William Flanagan ... and His Music," *American Composers Alliance* 9, no. 4 (1961): 17.

Early Years

Flanagan was born on August 14, 1923, in Detroit, Michigan, to William and Elona Flanagan. Employees of the American Telephone and Telegraph Company, the Flanagans had no musical background and did not raise their son in an artistic environment. From a stoutly Catholic Irish-American family, William—the son—was initially drawn to the church and even considered the priesthood.[2] The bulk of his early musical exposures were movie scores from the thirties, and, as a self-taught keyboardist at age fifteen, the young Flanagan was reported to have realized the scores of Max Steiner by ear while he was a student and chapel organist at the University of Detroit High School.[3]

In 1941, Flanagan began his college education at the University of Michigan and the University of Detroit, where his studies were aimed towards a degree in literature and journalism. Although he had an affinity for music, Flanagan initially resisted his musical yearnings and sought a more "practical" lifestyle.[4] While studying journalism, he procured an ushering job with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, which began his exposure to the standard repertory of western classical music.[5] It was not until the age of twenty that Flanagan "had begun to grapple with the bare concept of improvising control

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[2] Mel Gussow, *Edward Albee: A Singular Journey: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013), 92.

[3] Ruth C. Friedberg, *American Art Song and American Poetry* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1981), 162.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ned Rorem, *The Grove Dictionary of American Music*, s.v. "Flanagan, William," vol. 3, ed. Charles Hiroshi Garrett (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 311.

over [his] random improvisations."[6] At this point, Flanagan was still living with his parents in Detroit, and he would later recall, "When I told my family I wanted to study music, they thought of either putting me away or sending me away. Then they thought they might just as well let me be, since I was being so pigheaded around the house anyway."[7]

Flanagan was accepted the Eastman School of Music in 1945, where he studied with Burrill Phillips and Bernard Rogers.[8] While there, he teamed up with a very talented group of friends, including James Francis Brown, Charles Strouse, and Laurence Rosenthal. The four of them were "the four shining lights of the composition class,"[9] according to Brown, who would become Flanagan's roommate and confidante for many years to come. Both Rosenthal and Strouse were incredible musicians who went on to compose for Broadway musicals and the big screen. Both Rosenthal and Strouse were significantly younger than Flanagan, three and six years, respectively, which would prove to be a pattern in Flanagan's social world. Strouse, who was only fifteen at the time, looked up to Flanagan as a mentor and considered him his best friend during this period. About Flanagan, Strouse remembers, "I was very young, so Bill was not my only friend, but he was a mentor in many ways. He was the first person who ever had anything to say about my being talented. I looked up to him tremendously. He shaped my attitude toward

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[6] Lester Trimble, "William Flanagan: An Appreciation," *Stereo Review* 23, no. 5 (November 1969): 118.

[7] Peter Reilly, "Introducing the Staff: William Flanagan," *Stereo Review* 21, no. 5 (November 1968): 134.

[8] Rorem, "Flanagan, William," 311.

[9] Gussow, *Edward Albee,* 92.

literature, poetry, the awareness of certain kinds of music."[10] This highly regarded view of Flanagan was not entirely unique, but he was admired and respected by nearly everyone with whom he came into contact.

Musically, Flanagan struggled to some degree in the early years of his studies, which is to be expected considering his relative late entry into the world of composition. Flanagan even states in a reflective set of album notes, "The central issue beclouding my work during those early years: I frankly lacked technique to compose extended instrumental works and was temporarily incapable of bluffing them."[11] Because of this, he would dedicate much of his early studies to his song writing. Flanagan later admitted that his initial attraction to the genre of song was not entirely artistic, but stemmed from his lack of compositional technique at this early stage of his development.[12]

It was during his time at Eastman School in 1946 that Flanagan wrote his first compositions: two short songs, *The Dugout* followed shortly by *After Long Silence.* The despondent texts for these first two songs, by Siegfried Sassoon and John Donne respectively, are typical of his early songs, and they closely resemble Flanagan's own troubled nature.[13] It was not entirely out of necessity, however, that Flanagan was drawn to the voice and the small form of songwriting. He would continue to employ this miniature form for the rest of his, unfortunately, brief, life. These initial songs would prove to be stereotypical of his early collection, in that they were packed with melody

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[10] Gussow, *Edward Albee,* 93.

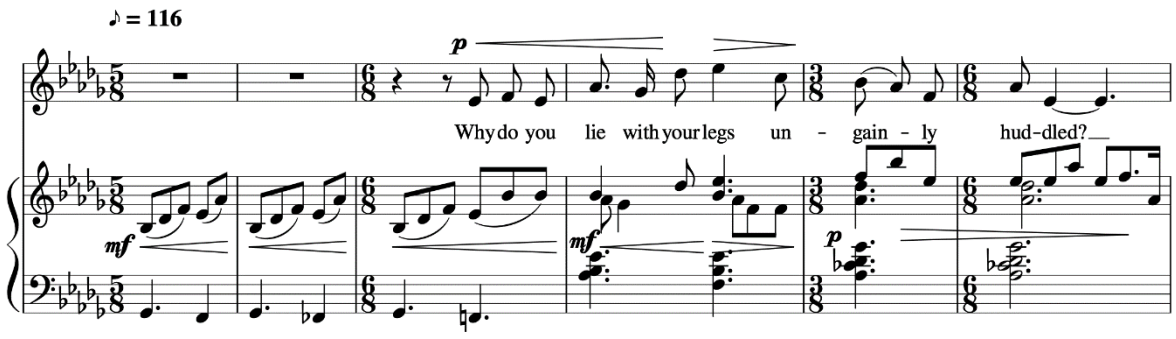
[11] William Flanagan, liner notes to *Songs and Cycles*, Desto, 3692005, LP, 1969.

[12] Trimble, "An Appreciation," 118.

[13] John Gruen, *The Party's Over Now: Reminiscences of the Fifties—New York's Artists, Writers, Musicians, and their Friends* (New York: The Viking Press, 1972), 114.

and lived to serve the words—rare qualities from a composer during a period that tended to value complexity and the avant-garde.

EXAMPLE 1. Flanagan, "The Dugout," mm. 1 – 6.[14]



In example 1, we see the first six measures of music ever to be composed by Flanagan—written in December 1946 and published by Peer International Corporation. It is fascinating to look at these first few moments of his compositional career because they embody many of the characteristics that would become staples of his writing style. Immediately, the musician is intellectually stimulated with the irregular meter of the first two bars, which changes directions and settles into a regular meter at m. 3. These initial two bars set up an expectation that is uprooted the moment the voice enters the equation, which feeds the idea that Flanagan is allowing the music to serve the words rather than the other way around. He then continues to manipulate the bar lines in the following measure to ensure the syntactical stress is true to his, and the phrase's, intentions. Even as

[14] William Flanagan, "The Dugout" text by Siegfried Sassoon (New York: Peer International Corporation, 1953), 2.

he is just beginning to gain his balance and become a real composer, Flanagan is writing in such a way as to establish his sophisticated and acute awareness of the world of sound.

Despite some struggles, Flanagan developed his compositional techniques swiftly, and in the summer of 1947, he was invited as a scholarship student to study at the Berkshire Music Center at Tanglewood. Flanagan thrived in this environment, where he was given the opportunity to study under two staunch figures in the history of song composition, Arthur Honegger and Samuel Barber. Consequently, he was invited to return as a fellow the following summer.[15]

Before this could happen, however, there would be a dramatic shift in the lives of several promising young students at the Eastman School. It was during the 1947-48 academic year that Howard Hanson, a Pulitzer prize-winning composer and the director of the school, would spearhead a purge of all homosexuals who were enrolled. Flanagan, being proudly gay in a time that strongly frowned upon the homosexual lifestyle, was dismissed from the program and not allowed to complete his degree. His classmate, James Brown, explained that "they threw out all the people they thought were gay, and all the people they thought were Left. They threw out all the best people."[16]

Nevertheless, Flanagan was welcomed the following summer to return to the Tanglewood Music Festival, and it would prove to be a pivotal period in the young composer's life, because he was able to study with Aaron Copland. Here, Flanagan took advantage of such world-class teaching and composed some of his most piercing songs

[15] Gruen, *The Party's Over Now*, 114.

[16] Gussow, *Edward Albee*, 93.

(six in total). He even branched out into instrumental music, composing a handful of orchestral and chamber works, one of which would later gain near-repertory status.

Arguably, the event that had the largest impact on Flanagan during his Tanglewood study was his introduction to fellow student, Ned Rorem, who would later become one of the most prolific song composers of our time. Their friendship and mutual admiration would be a catalyst for each other's growth, which proved to be a positive thing for the future of American music and song. Rorem later described Flanagan as his "close, if competitive, ally for twenty-three years."[17]

In 1948, following his time at Tanglewood, Flanagan moved to New York City and began study with David Diamond,[18] one of America's greatest, if unrecognized, composers of his time. This student-teacher relationship proved to be incredibly beneficial to Flanagan's compositional development and career. More impactful, perhaps, was the friendship that would linger for years to follow, which would have severe implications for Flanagan's future partner and, in turn, his life.

[17] Ned Rorem, *Critical Affairs: A Composer's Journal* (New York: G. Braziller, 1970), 34.

[18] Friedberg, *American Art Song*, 162-63.

Self-Exploration and Compositional Development

Upon moving to New York City in 1948, Flanagan was introduced to a young man at a party—they were immediately drawn to one another's artistic impulses and intellectual charm, thanks to an extended conversation on Ravel's music during a late night social gathering.[19] This young man was none other than Edward Albee, who at the time was just another young playwright in New York City, trying to find his artistic voice. Their friendship would develop into a passionate romance with its share of pleasure and heartbreak, but one thing is certain, neither man would hold the place they do today in American history without the other. Both were major supporters of each other's work before, during, and long after their romantic relationship had passed. In fact, it was Flanagan who sent Albee's first major play, *The Zoo Story,* to David Diamond in Europe, which led to its German and American productions and to Albee's incredible rise in popularity and demand throughout the theatrical world.[20] Conversely, Albee, as an avid supporter of Flanagan's work, would collaborate with him regularly as a librettist, most notably in the two cantatas, *The Lady of Tearful Regret* and *Song for a Winter Child.*[21]

Flanagan's "early period" spanned from 1946 to 1951, and during this time he wrote his first nine songs. As previously mentioned, the composer was initially drawn to vocal music out of necessity. However, Flanagan would quickly discover that he was

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[19] Gruen, *The Party's Over Now*, 118.

[20] Friedberg, *American Art Song,* 163.

[21] Edward Albee, "William Flanagan," *American Composers Alliance* 9, no. 4 (1961): 12-13.

genuinely passionate about the setting of words to music. Drawn by the hunt for the ideal vehicle for given poetry, Flanagan recalled his early song-writing years:

> The struggle for a properly contemporary musical language had been, most of us felt, the business and achievement of our immediate predecessors; they had supplied the "how" and, in so doing, had left us with the musico-syntactical wherewithal to concentrate on the "what." If … my "what" was a poem, the fun [was] searching for and perhaps *finding* the special musical thing that would make it a song.[22]

This early group of songs was highly influenced, as is to be expected, by Flanagan's impressive collection of teachers, and it shared qualities of each mentor. Hints of Barber, Copland, and Diamond ring especially clear when listening to his music, but as Rorem notes, "Flanagan's expression *within* this language remains highly personal."[23] Flanagan gives a small insight regarding his ability to find individuality when he muses on the subject of the *real* song composer by saying, "The song composer who denies having made subtle and personal harmonic discoveries in searching out musical framework for a poem is probably not the genuine article—not a *real* song composer."[24]

Of note among this early collection of songs is "Valentine to Sherwood Anderson," written in 1947 with text by Gertrude Stein. Stein was a remarkable woman

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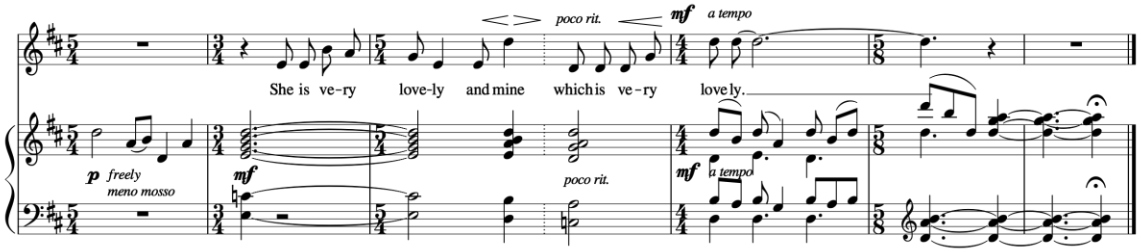
[22] William Flanagan, "On Wings of Song In American Style," *New York Herald Tribune*, Febuary 22, 1959.

[23] Rorem, "William Flanagan ... and His Music," 15.

[24] Flanagan, "On Wings of Song."

and literary force, having a major presence in American literature, so Flanagan's choosing her poetry to set was not surprising. However, to set this particular poem was a strong choice, as the content is a love poem from one woman to another. Given its timing in Flanagan's output, which was during his Rochester days, one might deduce that this song was a significant factor in his dismissal from Eastman.

EXAMPLE 2. Flanagan, "Valentine to Sherwood Anderson," mm. 30 – 35.[25]



All of Flanagan's music is ripe with melody (with one glaring exception—the satirical *Upside-down Man,* which will be covered later), and "Valentine" is a wonderful specimen to show just that. In example 2, the first measure is the end of the melody from a brief piano interlude. This excerpt shows how Flanagan was able to seamlessly pass the melodic material between the voice and piano (m. 31) to the voice and then (m. 33) back to the piano, always keeping it highlighted and on the forefront. Example 2 provides us with another viewpoint concerning the attention and care placed upon the setting of text by Flanagan—in just six measures, there are four meter shifts, none of which negatively affect the colloquial line. Rather, the changes in meter affirm his intention of staying

[25] William Flanagan, "Valentine to Sherwood Anderson" text by Gertrude Stein (New York: Peer International Corporation, 1951), 5.

loyal to the language stress by ensuring that the most important word, "lovely," falls in both instances, on the downbeat in both instances. This allows for clear and concise annunciation by the singer.

This collection of songs from Flanagan's early period has several valuable characteristics that make them excellent selections for singers of any age, but are particularly effective for younger voices. These songs are challenging in that they contain angular, disjunct leaps while the melody remains paramount, making them much more accessible to a less developed ear than many of his contemporaries' works—or even some of his own later works such as "Horror Movie" or "Plants Cannot Travel." The metrical and rhythmic complexities add a healthy and desirable challenge for the eager young musicians as they develop their artistic skills and theoretical understanding.

Flanagan's early period contains nearly half of what would eventually be his entire output. But his early compositions were not exclusively song. Flanagan managed to develop his technical skills to a point where he successfully composed several pieces for chamber ensemble and eventually full orchestra. His first major success in this instrumental genre came with the composition of *Divertimento*. Initially written for string quartet in 1947, Flanagan expanded the piece for woodwinds, horns, trumpets, timpani, and strings the following year. This work earned him the title of "Young American Composer of the Year" in 1949, which confirmed his proficiency in instrumental writing.[26] In spite of the success Flanagan had composing chamber works, he would write only five works solely for orchestra in his entire life. The first three, *Divertimento, A*

[26] "Wins Composing Prize; William Flanagan, 25, Scores with his Divertimento," *New York Times,* May 11, 1949.

Concert Overture (1948), and *A Concert Ode* (1951), would not even have their premiere until 1961.[27]

In 1949, Flanagan made his first trip to Europe, spending a majority of his time in Paris, soaking in the artistic life of the city. Charles Strouse, composer of the Broadway hit *Bye Bye, Birdie* and Flanagan's dear friend from Eastman, had remained close and accompanied him on the trip. This seemed the obvious destination due to Flanagan's interest in French music, especially pieces that used small forms, which were so prevalent in France at the time, particularly in song. One of the principle reasons for the trip was that he and Strouse were able to meet and study with Nadia Boulanger, an experience that would only bolster Flanagan's infatuation with song writing.[28]

Strouse was only one of Flanagan's many friends, and during his first several years in New York City, Flanagan quickly became the center of a very impressive social circle full of successful young composers and artists. This young gang of bohemians, in addition to Strouse, Brown, and Rorem, included Laurence Rosenthal (who would go on to win six Emmy awards), Noel Farrand, Ned Rorem, Edward Lewis, Russell Smith (who would win a George Gershwin Special Award and a National Institute of Arts and Letters honorary prize), Israel Citkowitz, and, of course, Edward Albee.[29] According to Strouse, Flanagan was "the leader of the pack … the one we all looked up to."[30] They would primarily spend their time at the Carnegie Tavern, just behind Carnegie Hall, where social gatherings were wild and somewhat debaucherous—just the sort one might expect

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[27] Rorem, "William Flanagan ... and His Music," 13-19.

[28] Gussow, *Edward Albee,* 93.

[29] Ibid., 98.

[30] Ibid., 93.

from a bunch of young musicians. Rorem would later muse on the subject, saying, "In those days, being friends meant getting terribly drunk with an awful lot of sex. There wasn't sex in the family. People slept out of the family, but when I think back on it, the amount of promiscuity and the amount of drinking that went on in this milieu was astonishing."[31] In a biography of Albee, there is an astonishing story recalled (although the source is unclear as to who told it) surrounding the events from one of those wild nights out in the early 1950's. The tale recounts how a gentleman made a pass at Flanagan, who flirtatiously pursued the gentleman outside, only to discover he was a detective. Flanagan was detained on the spot, simply for being homosexual.

While Albee and Flanagan moved to New York City around the same time in 1948, Flanagan spent the first four years of his time in New York living with close friend from Eastman, James (Jim) Brown. Regardless, Albee and Flanagan were attracted to one another from the start. But that was to be expected—as Brown put it, "Every homosexual in New York wanted to go to bed with [Flanagan]. He could have whoever he wanted, and he had most of them one way or another."[32] It was not until the summer of 1952, when Flanagan and Albee decided to go together on a six-month trip to Europe, that they truly became lovers. They spent much of their time in France and Italy, absorbing art and culture while falling in love.

Upon returning from their European journey in 1952, the two moved into an apartment in Greenwich Village. And in the summer of 1953, Flanagan became a fellow

[31] Gussow, *Edward Albee,* 102.

[32] Ibid., 94.

at the MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire, with Albee traveling along with him.[33] This early period in their relationship was full of love and passion, and it had a marked impact on the quality of each other's art and life.[34]

The piece that would become Flanagan's first independently written song, without the oversight of a teacher, was "Song for a Winter Child" with text by Albee. Flanagan naturally had some insecurities due to his late start in composition, but thanks to his first serious relationship, as well as his several successful compositions, he found himself provided with a springboard to his self-sufficient career in composition.

In 1951, Flanagan went on to compose two of his most successful works, *Time's Long Ago!* and *A Concert Ode*. The former was his first song cycle, consisting of six songs set to the poetry of Herman Melville, and the latter, Flanagan's preeminent orchestral work to date. Both marked a significant turn in Flanagan's compositional style. Prior to this point, he had managed to write exquisite work in both the orchestral and vocal genres, but it was not until this moment that he broke away from the potent influence of his master teachers and truly composed music in his own style.

The success of *A Concert Ode* is uniquely chronicled in an article by Flanagan titled "How to Succeed in Composing Without Really Succeeding"—published in the July 1962 edition of *HiFi Stereo Review,* over a decade after the piece's conception. This article was an attempt to express his longtime frustrations with, what he perceived to be,

[33] Karen Sampson, "Medal Day 2011; Honoring the Playwright: Edward Albee," *The MacDowell Colony Newsletter* 40, no. 2, (Winter 2011): 4-6.

[34] Gruen, *The Party's Over Now,* 117.

a lack of compositional encouragement in America.[35] Composed over six months, *A Concert Ode* was premiered by a major symphony orchestra (although it is not made clear which one), and after a gracious reception, the piece was performed the following season by several other major orchestras, including the Philadelphia Orchestra.[36] This eventually led to a commercial recording. With *A Concert Ode,* Flanagan seemed to have a piece that was very close to becoming a part of standard orchestral repertory. However, in his article, he details the expenses that go into such a project, including copyist fees, publisher fees, travel, and of course, the time to devote to such a project. Ultimately, he claimed a financial loss for this, his most successful orchestral work.[37] It could be argued that such a loss directly discouraged Flanagan's writing of future orchestral works—it was ten years before his next foray into this genre, and even then, he would only ever write two more pieces for orchestra in his lifetime.[38]

While it was no more financially lucrative than orchestral composition, songwriting seemed the obvious choice for Flanagan, and this was where he focused most of his compositional attention. The premiere of his song cycle, *Time's Long Ago* (1951), began to establish Flanagan as a songwriter of choice, as opposed to a songwriter of necessity, and the cycle's Melville texts are like those from his early period, in that they are somber in nature. The selection of Melville poetry also continued Flanagan's trend of valuing the American poet: e. e. cummings, Gertrude Stein, Ned Rorem, and Gerard

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[35] William Flanagan, "How to Succeed in Composing Without Really Succeeding," *HiFi/Stereo Review* 9, no. 1 (July 1962): 50-53.

[36] Flanagan, "How to Succeed in Composing," 52.

[37] Ibid., 53.

[38] Nicolas Slonimsky and Laura Kuhn, "Flanagan, William," in *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians,* vol. 2 (New York: Schirmer Books, 2001), 1129.

Manley Hopkins, to name a few. Most noteworthy in this music is his harmonic syntax, which begins to break away from the formally constructed secondary seventh and ninth chords, and pursues far more dissonances where he may have previously avoided them.[39]

Having now reached a pivotal point in his compositional life, in 1951 Flanagan turned his focus toward the massive undertaking of writing an opera. *Bartleby*, in one act, is Flanagan's only complete work of this genre. For *Bartleby,* Flanagan seemingly put all his other compositional work aside (with the one exception of *The Weeping Pleiades* a short song cycle for baritone and chamber ensemble with text by A. E. Housman premiered in 1953) for the three years prior to the preview of *Bartleby.* His efforts toward composing an opera seemed inevitable in a musical culture that all but expects composers to write for the stage. Flanagan even began one of his early journalism articles, written in 1953 for the *New York Herald Tribune* (the year before his own operatic debut) with, "It is no surprise to any American composer who talks composing with other American composers that there is a strong, not to say astonishing, trend toward opera writing in the United States."[40]

Bartleby, consisting of four scenes, is sixty minutes long. The libretto was co-crafted by James Hinton Jr. and Edward Albee[41] (Flanagan and Albee began living together during the opera's formation.)[42] The plot comes from the Melville story, *Bartleby the Scrivener*, which chronicles the tale of Bartleby, a scrivener (clerk) for a

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[39] Rorem, "William Flanagan…and His Music," 15.

[40] William Flanagan, "U.S. Composers Now Opera-Minded." *New York Herald Tribune*, January 4, 1953.

[41] Rorem, "William Flanagan…and His Music," 19.

[42] Gruen, *The Party's Over Now,* 110.

successful Wall Street lawyer. Bartleby is initially a good employee but soon refuses to work, and at every request to execute an assignment, responds with the phrase "I prefer not to." On top of his insolence, Bartleby begins to live in his place of work, and when the employer asks him to leave, Bartleby refuses. The employer then shows pity for Bartleby, allowing him to stay until the complaints about his presence force the lawyer to have him arrested. Bartleby dies shortly afterward of self-negligence.[43]

On May 10, 1954, two of the scenes were presented in New York City for an invited audience, with a reduced orchestration. The critical reception was negative, and a *New York Times* reviewer even commented, "It is to be doubted if a work that took so long to make its points would ever seem dramatic."[44] To be fair, this commentary could reference the source material as much as it does the music. Nonetheless, this defeat led to a three-year withdrawal by Flanagan from the "competitive scene" of composition.[45] During this musical seclusion, Flanagan did not have any of his music published, nor was there a single performance of any of his work. *Bartleby* would not have its full-length premier until seven years later.

The years 1955-1958 leave a perplexing hole in the timeline of William Flanagan. Not only was there musical silence, but even his friends seem to avoid the subject in their memoirs, which suggests dark times in Flanagan's life. It is known, however, that during this time he continued to live in a Greenwich Village apartment with Albee, and there

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[43] M. Thomas Inge, *Bartleby the Inscrutable: A Collection of Commentary of Herman Mellville's Tale "Bartleby the Scrivener"* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1979), 11.

[44] R. P., "Composers of Today Present 3D Concert," *New York Times*, May 11, 1954.

[45] Rorem, "Flanagan, William," 311.

were no more romantic trips to France or Germany.[46] Of particular note, the two of them took jobs at Western Union delivering telegrams, their creative lights dimming and not living up to their true potential.[47]

It was during these dark years that we are more formally introduced to William Flanagan the cynic. Previously, he had fed his journalistic talent by writing an occasional article in a newspaper or national music journals, but the quantity of articles written by Flanagan increased dramatically during this musical hiatus. A telling column was published in the *New York Herald Tribune* in the fall of 1956, titled simply "End of Young Composers?." The article tells a bitter story of the sad state of American music and vividly paints the picture of how Flanagan felt about it. In it, Flanagan commiserates, "At this writing, the outlook for at least the newer generation of composing Americans is more bleak than it has been in 25 years. The long-range progress of the American composer begins to look as illusory as the progress of the man who climbs a descending escalator."[48]

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[46] Friedberg, *American Art Song,* 163.

[47] Gussow, *Edward Albee,* 116.

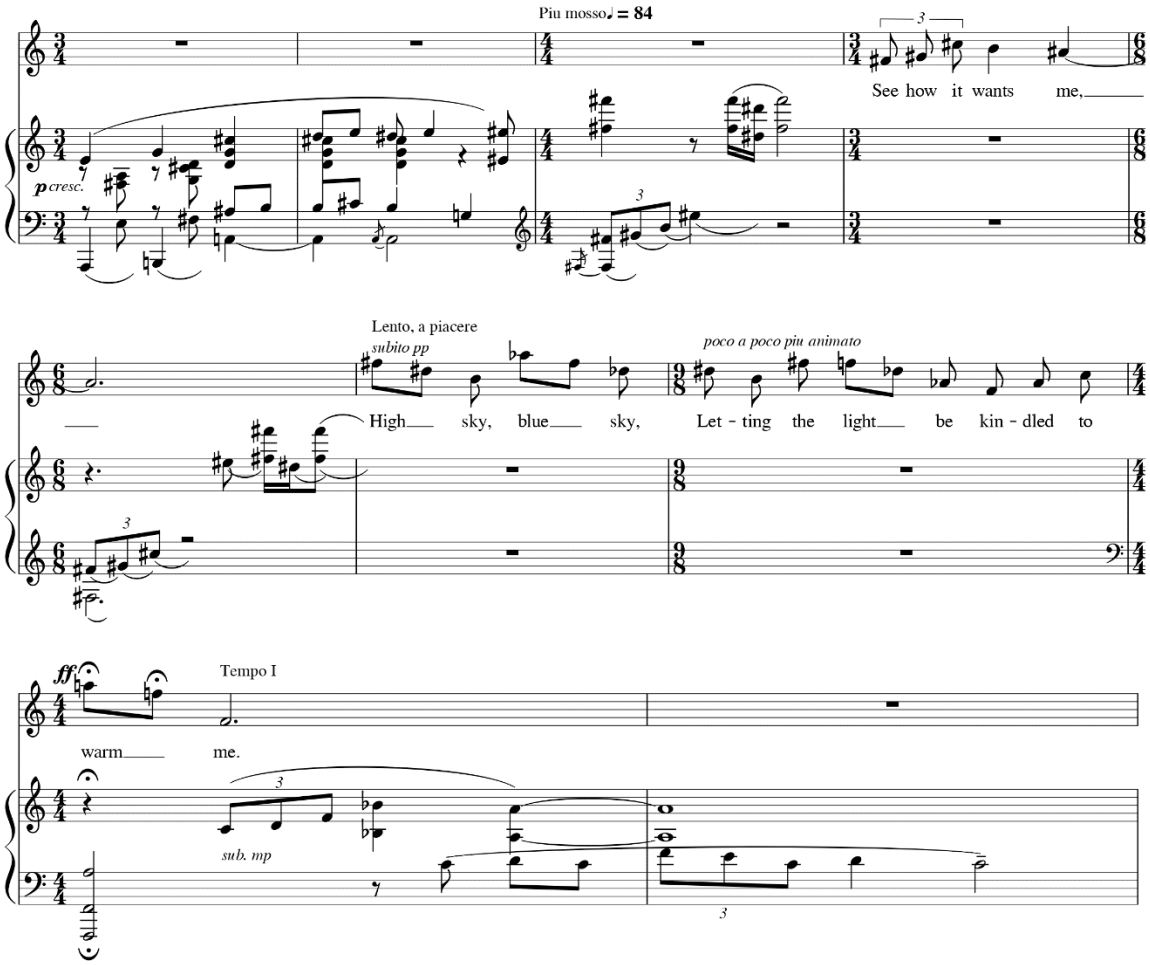
[48] William Flanagan, "End of Young Composers?," *New York Herald Tribune*, October 21, 1956.

Late Period

While continuing to write free-lance, Flanagan also accepted a regular position as a music critic for the *New York Herald Tribune* in 1957 and, while it is difficult to determine for certain, this seemed to lead to a sudden renewal of spirit.[49] The composer started to make up for lost time—after three years of "radio silence"—when five works were composed in quick succession. All these works were written from 1959 to 1960, and were composed for voice with accompaniment supplied by chamber ensemble, piano, or, in the case of the song "Goodbye, my fancy," for guitar. The general mood of the poetry that was chosen is lighter and more optimistic than any he had previously set.

[49] Jack Beeson, liner notes to *Love's Secret And Other Songs by American Composers*, VoxBox, 36641860, CD, 1996.

EXAMPLE 3. Flanagan, "See How They Love Me," mm. 11 – 19.[50]



Written in 1960, "See How They Love Me" is a beautiful illustration of the type of song Flanagan was writing during his "comeback." Once again, he skillfully wove imposing melodic material into the texture of the song, making sure to keep it at the forefront, whether it existed in the voice or piano. As we can see from example 3, for the first time, Flanagan went so far as to omit the piano part completely from the texture. This bold choice gives the listener the impression of recitative, while at the same time

[50] William Flanagan, "See How They Love Me" text by Howard Moss (New York: C. F. Peters Corporation, 1965), 3.

maintaining a sweeping melodic idea that spans over an octave. The warm and hopeful text found in example 3 is also an extreme shift from the dark and despondent texts that are found before his relationship with Albee. Perhaps Flanagan was purposely choosing more positive texts to distract him from his heartbreak, although, at the end of the poem, the idea is presented, "yet, you [love] rebuke me," which certainly did not allow for Flanagan to escape completely from his darker mood.

The real exception to the optimistic texts from this late period is *The Lady of Tearful Regret.* The libretto for this "narrative drama" for soprano, baritone, and chamber ensemble was written by Albee, coming at the end of their rocky relationship. This work presents the soprano as the "lady of tearful regret" and the baritone as the "chorus" or narrator. The drama begins with the soprano's inquiry, holding harp strings in hand, "Oh, if I were able, would I not restring?" The question is posed, and the chorus then enters, reflecting on the forlorn woman and surrounding scenery before finally telling the tale of how the scene came to be. The chorus vividly relates how the woman was wandering through the wilderness—gray, gloomy, and jagged—when a young blonde male harpist enters and transforms the atmosphere with his very presence. Overwhelmed with lust for the beautiful youth, the soprano is swept away by the ensuing scene—with music that seems to "drip" in a sensual manner. At the height of her fervor, the soprano, even more passionately, rips away the harp strings and, in a heated frenzy, slays the boy. As her mad scene continues to unfold, the futility of her circumstance becomes painfully clear.[51]

[51] William Flanagan, "The Lady of Tearful Regret," text by Edward Albee (New York: American Composers Alliance, 1959), 1-95.

The Lady of Tearful Regret is an excellent representation of how Flanagan's work tended to mirror his personal life, granted, not always as vividly as is seen in this piece. As mentioned, this work comes at the end of his three-year hiatus from the "scene of competitive composition,"[52] but more importantly, the publication of the work coincides with the end of his loving, yet tumultuous, relationship with Albee.[53] The obvious correlation in this context is the idea that, like the "lady" in this piece, Flanagan harbored significant regret in not being able to make Albee happy during their time together. More fascinating, however, is that the libretto was written by none other than Albee during the last stages of their relationship. Albee's imagery is strikingly clear as the baritone describes the soprano's initial wandering: "See her sadly recall how she wandered, wandered sad and uselessly amid the gray, gray boulders wide-eyed, heart hungry, see the phallic shadows loom across the arid sunless place." The "phallic shadows looming" provides an insight into the character's intense sexual desires and sets the scene for the entrance of who Albee describes as, "a youth...blonde and smiling… turning (phallic) shadows into light." It is not surprising that the collaborators chose to cast a woman as the central character, as there was a social expectation at the time that one's homosexuality should not be overtly referenced in their work.[54] Nonetheless, contextual insight on Flanagan's and Albee's personal lives exposes the palpable homoeroticism present in this work.

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[52] Rorem, "William Flanagan…and His Music," 15.

[53] Gruen, *The Party's Over Now*, 114.

[54] Howard Pollack, "The Dean of Gay American Composers," *American Music* 18, no. 1 (2000): 39-49.

The Lady of Tearful Regret had its debut on February 24, 1959 in Carnegie Hall, as a part of an experimental concert series produced by none other than William Flanagan.[55] Inspiration for the concert series was provided to Flanagan by his former teacher and one of the musicians he valued most in this world, Aaron Copland.[56] Six years prior to the concert series, Flanagan wrote an article in which he celebrated the 25-year anniversary of the "Copland-Sessions Concerts," a concert series that promoted music by Americans, produced by composers Roger Sessions and Aaron Copland. Within the article, Flanagan praises the innovation of the producers and even credits them with reviving the heart of American music with such an undertaking. At the conclusion, Flanagan even states, "Looking over the present group of young composers from an internal vantage point…this reporter was led to considerable guilty speculation over what may have been, from Mr. Copland, a gentle hint."[57]

Although it took six years to bring the series to life, Flanagan took the hint, and beginning in 1959, teamed up with his friend and colleague Ned Rorem to start another series of concerts titled "Music for the Voice by Americans." Like the Copland-Sessions concerts, Flanagan and Rorem's primary objective was to provide living American composers an outlet for their song compositions. They wanted to break the mold of being told what to compose by music societies and donors, and to create a venue in which composers offered their music on their own terms. In an article previewing the concert

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[55] Gussow, *Edward Albee*, 104.

[56] Ned Rorem, *Settling the Score; Essays on Music* (Orlando, Florida: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1988), 33.

[57] William Flanagan, "Anniversary of a Bold Experiment," *New York Herald Tribune*, April 26, 1953.

series debut, Flanagan whimsically remarks, “We [aren’t] asking an audience to come especially to hear a well-known soloist, a famous chamber group, or even a ‘special’ concert; we [are] asking one to fill Carnegie Recital Hall to listen to music by two reasonable experienced, but scarcely legendary composers.” He goes on to say, “We simply want to play music, new and old for some people,” adding in his cynical fashion, “If we get our audience, nothing will have been accomplished beyond our own pleasure. If we don’t, there will be scant time for brooding; we’ll be quite busy removing the egg from our faces.”[58]

The initial concert in the “Music for the Voice by Americans” series was said to be “received with immense enthusiasm” by a *New York Times* reviewer.[59] Its success led to four consecutive seasons of performances and showcased composers such as Virgil Thomson, David Diamond, Daniel Pinkham, John Gruen, and Lou Harrison.[60]

Meanwhile, Flanagan was entering the most active years of his life. Not only did the new concert series with Rorem take off, but starting in 1959 his song-writing also came back into full swing—he composed six of his last seven songs between 1959-1962. A strong influencing factor in this revival was the arrival of a new friend and collaborator, Howard Moss. Moss moved into the same Greenwich Village apartment complex as Flanagan’s, and through their friendship, they developed a natural working relationship. Both Flanagan and Moss harbored a disdain for the social and academic constructs placed on artists, and for this reason he seemed to be a perfect fit for their

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[58] Flanagan, “On Wings of Song.”

[59] John Briggs. “Works of Rorem and Ned Flanagan[*sic*] Sung.” *New York Times*, Febuary 25, 1959.

[60] Friedberg, *American Art Song*, 164.

collaboration. Moss felt that "schools of poetry [and] insistencies on the way to write or not to write are deadening,"[61] while Flanagan knew that "the directional flow of art will go where it will…[but] talent will surface, no matter what the style."[62]

Of Flanagan's final seven songs, five were settings of Moss poetry. In 1968, Desto Records released an LP that contains this music. In the liner notes, Flanagan remarks that they "were consciously conceived as a model 'group' of the sort that recitalists end their programs with in Town Hall or some place. Except that…all the songs in this group are by me."[63] The first three were all composed in 1959—"If You Can," "Plants Cannot Travel," and "See How They Love Me," are beautiful and touching poems that appear light on the surface, but reach deep to the true meaning of love and its universal mystery. Rorem marks them as "the best of his career, taken altogether."[64]

With these songs, Flanagan reached the pinnacle of his own personal voice, one that, as he puts it, is "concerned with the *sound* of music" and desires a gratifying outcome as opposed to technical feat of grandeur. [65] Flanagan was vehemently opposed to the idea of music as a way to show off the composer's level of intellect or skill. In an interview for *Stereo Review* near the end of his life Flanagan berates a younger generation of composers, saying, "I don't understand why young composers today,

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[61] Howard Moss, *Writing Against Time; Critical Essays and Reviews* (New York: Morrow, 1969), 194.

[62] William Flanagan, "Musings on Shift in Music's Trends," *New York Herald Tribune*, September 7, 1958.

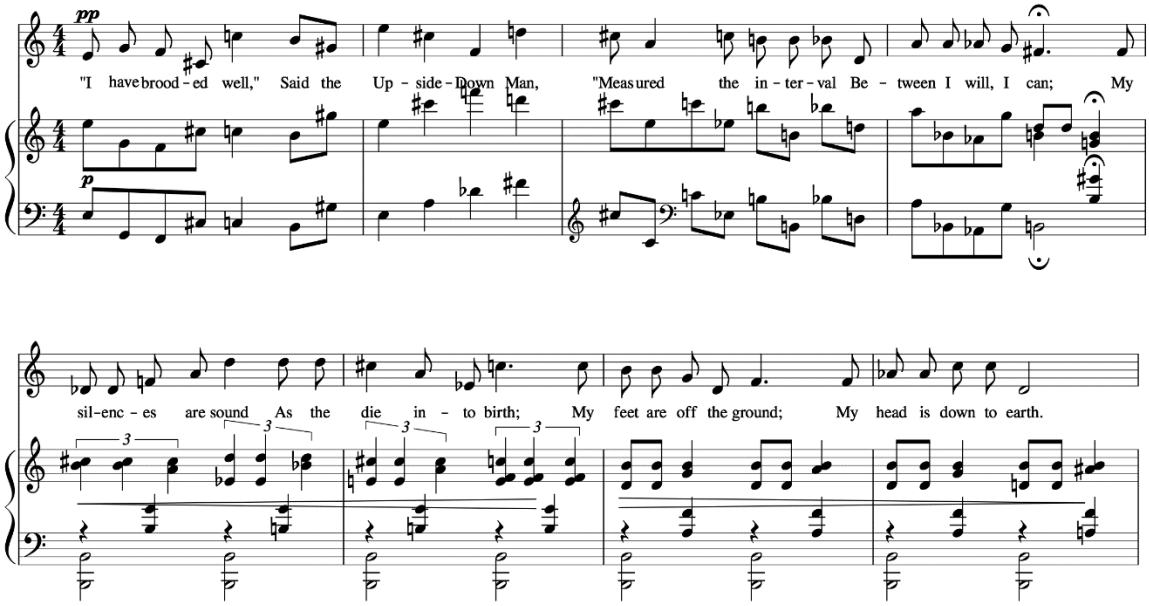
[63] Flanagan, *Songs and Cycles.*

[64] Rorem, "William Flanagan…and His Music," 16.

[65] Ibid.

instead of writing a playable piece for say, the park band, are knocking their brains out trying to write a masterpiece."[66]

EXAMPLE 4: Flanagan, "The Upside-Down Man," mm. 5 – 12.[67]



The remaining two pieces in Flanagan's collection of Moss songs are hysterical showstoppers, not like anything he had previously written. In example 4 "The Upside-Down Man" tells the story of a man who has lived a life in which "his head is where his feet should be."[68] The song is written in an egregiously difficult tonal realm, one that he had publicly denounced for years at this point—atonality. The poetry is essentially a list

[66] Peter Reilly, "Introducing the Staff: William Flanagan," *Stereo Review* 21, no. 5 (November 1968): 134.

[67] William Flanagan, "The Upside-Down Man" in *Vote for Names; Peer-Southern 20th Century American Songbook,* text by Howard Moss (New York: Peer International Corporation, 1964), 21.

[68] Ibid., 23.

of opposites and contradictions, and the music follows suit. The very idea that a composer and journalist who was so outspokenly anti-atonality would write in this medium is ironic and "upside-down." This example provides a miniature insight into the complexity and absurdity of *The Upside-Down Man.*

The second song, "Horror Movie," also pushes the boundaries of Flanagan's tonal existence, but it does so within a much more conventional framework. The text briefly chronicles and satirizes the plights of several major horror movie characters including Spider-Woman, Dracula, and Wolf-Man.[69] This work is by far the lightest and most humorous of all Flanagan's compositions, and is meant to be performed as an encore or recital finisher. While some of the references are specific to the genre of 1950's horror films, the content is still refreshingly relevant and funny today. Both pieces stretch the tonal boundaries as far as Flanagan was ever willing to go, and even when he does make bold or nontraditional choices, they are all with complete servitude to the text and drama. About this same time, in 1960, Flanagan began to write regularly as a music critic for *Stereo Review*. These critical writings, as well as his articles and critiques in *The New York Herald Tribune* and other freelance journalism, all combine to create a stalwart collection of publications, well into the hundreds. Flanagan was highly respected in the journalism world for his hard-hitting criticisms, cynical demeanor, and highly intellectual commentary. A collection of all Flanagan's publications in book form would certainly be a valuable and fascinating resource for the study of American music.

[69] William Flanagan, "Horror Movie," text by Howard Moss (New York: C. F. Peters Corporation, 1965), 2-8.

The Critic

Even a cursory examination of examples of Flanagan's critical writings would be both valuable and fascinating, giving us better insight into his intelligence, wit, sarcasm, bitterness, and complexity. For example, in the May 1961 issue of *HiFi/Stereo Review*, Flanagan reviewed a recording of Milton Babbitt's *Composition for Four Instruments* and *Composition for Viola and Piano*, writing:

> A liner note by the composer himself suggests that the viola piece "usually has been regarded as a more accessible work than that for four instruments…" – a statement with which I could scarcely agree less. Where the *Composition for Four Instruments* is full of fanciful woodwind figurations and cool penetrating sonorities, the *Composition for Viola and Piano* sounds dour and quite opaque by comparison. The performances are clean, lucid, and impressively earnest.[70]

This quote speaks volumes about Flanagan the critic. From the start, we see that he is not afraid to go directly to the source and challenge it. His relationship with the musical world during this time gave him a powerful insight into the minds of the composers, while also allowing him to challenge them without insulting or diminishing their contributions. While he may disagree with some aspects of their work, he shows in this review a certain humility (although it is buried very deeply!).

[70] William Flanagan, Review, *HiFi/Stereo Review* 6, no. 5 (May 1961): 63.

Some years later, in the December 1962 issue of the same publication, Flanagan shows how passionate he is about the quality and value of a particular performance. He was certainly not afraid to express his true feelings about a work, as he demonstrates through his review of the Vienna Symphony Orchestra's performance of Debussy, Ravel, Dukas, and Chabrier, where he describes them in this manner:

> These performances are peculiarly lifeless and oddly insensitive. The Debussy orchestra sounds hard and tinny, and the studied monotony of Ravel's *Bolero* resembles a musical miscalculation rather than the tour de force of orchestral expertise that the work is.[71]

Flanagan was not exclusively negative, however, and gave great praise where and when it was due. Just two pages earlier in the same issue, Flanagan reviews a recording of Varése's *Arcana; Déserts; Offrandes,* conducted by Robert Craft, with high praise, marking the performance as "superb," the recording as "spectacular," and the quality as "enlivening." However, he does manage to lace this showering of praise with a healthy dose of cynicism by starting off the review as follows:

> No matter what one may think of the avant-garde snobbery that characterizes Robert Craft's professional activities, or of his steadfast conviction that his extremely limited talents are to be squandered on nothing that fails to measure up to his own understanding of creative

[71] William Flanagan, Review, *HiFi/Stereo Review* 9, no. 6 (December 1962): 92.

genius, only a man himself as biased as Stravinsky's young disciple could deny that he has performed an inestimable service in bringing the most difficult and recondite of contemporary music to discs."[72]

[72] William Flanagan, Review, *HiFi/Stereo Review* 9, no. 6 (December 1962): 88-90.

Final Days

From the outside looking in, the last decade of Flanagan's life, 1959-1969, seems to reflect the type of life anyone pursuing a career in composition might dream of possessing. For example, all three of his earlier orchestral works were premiered by reputable orchestras. Two more orchestral works, *Notations* and *Narrative,* were composed and given premieres to positive reviews. *Bartleby,* his one act opera, finally received its official premiere on January 24, 1961. Several lucrative opportunities to compose incidental music for plays arose, and Flanagan seized them with great success. And in the final two years of his life, Flanagan received the National Institute of Arts and Letters Award, was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize for his final work for voice, *Another August,* and commissioned by New York City Opera to write *Ice Age*, an opera with libretto by Albee which was left unfinished.[73]

However, as has been described, all was not as well as it seemed—Flanagan was struggled emotionally, mentally, and physically. Examples include the performances of *Bartleby,* which ended almost as immediately as they started. In a letter to David Diamond, Flanagan admitted his anguish over "the *Bartleby* fiasco" describing his experience as "the straw that broke not the camel's, but my back. But my general despondency—one that I can't seem to shake loose and one that has produced dismaying psychomatic illnesses—is a two-year accumulation of many things." Among these "many things" were not least of all his break-up and ensuing fallout with Albee as well as his being fired from his position as a music critic at the *New York Herald Tribune.*

[73] Rorem, "Flanagan, William," 311.

Sadly, William Flanagan was found dead in his New York apartment on September 1, 1969, due to an overdose of barbiturates.[74] And unfortunately, the major cause of turmoil throughout Flanagan's life was his lifelong bout with alcoholism. According to his friend, John Gruen, Flanagan was known to have periods of heavy drinking, and "as he lived alone, it was often difficult for him to call for help."[75] It is not a foreign concept that composers deal with a large amount of personal strife and sometimes turn to alcohol and drugs as an escape. Renowned living composer, Ricky Ian Gordon also struggled with alcoholism and claims he viewed Flanagan not only as a positive influence in his life musically, but as a warning concerning the fragility of life, naming Flanagan as a factor in his decision to become sober.[76]

Gruen described Flanagan as "one of the most intellectually stimulating people I have ever known," as well as a "deeply unhappy, somewhat sullen person."[77] Keeping this dichotomy of natures in mind, one should consider the words of Lester Trimble in his memorial article for Flanagan in *Stereo Review* seems all but mandated: "William Flanagan lived his life very hard, and he felt his tensions severely…the greatest tragedy is that, at the point when his music and all the professional aspects of his career were pointing upward and forward, everything should have stopped."[78]

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[74] Friedberg, *American Art Song*, 178.

[75] Gruen, *The Party's Over Now*, 119.

[76] Ricky Ian Gordon, interview by author, Houston, November 25, 2017.

[77] Gruen, *The Party's Over Now*, 114.

[78] Trimble, "An Appreciation," 118.

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